



Citation for published version:

Pearce, N & Kenny, M 2019, 'Brexit and the Anglosphere', *Political Insight*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 7 - 9.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905819854308>

DOI:

[10.1177/2041905819854308](https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905819854308)

Publication date:

2019

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

Pearce, N & Kenny, M 2019, 'Brexit and the Anglosphere', *Political Insight*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 7 - 9.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905819854308>. (C) SAGE Publications, 2019. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Brexit and the 'Anglosphere'

Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce

The Anglosphere Lineage

The idea that the UK's geo-political and economic future lies not with the European Union but with the 'Anglosphere' – the term given to the group of like-minded Anglophone countries who were once British colonies and dominions - has moved from the outer fringes of British politics into the limelight as a result of the Brexit referendum. The belief that there is a providential connection linking the UK with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States – all members of the powerful "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance - figures prominently in the rancorous political battle that has broken out over how to implement Brexit in the last two years. But what exactly is the Anglosphere? What is its historical lineage, and why does it continue to generate support in British politics? And does it frame a viable account of the UK's place in the world, in economic and foreign policy terms?

For some Brexiteers, the Anglosphere depicts a future that involves regaining an older heritage, with Britain reimagined as an oceanic 'world island', intimately connected with the liberal market economies of the English-speaking world. This, it is suggested, was set aside as a result of the UK's decision to join the EEC in the 1970s. This notion appeals because it provides an attractive reworking of older veins of argument about the merits of free trade, the liberalisation of the economy and the importance of parliamentary sovereignty to the British political system. For its critics, however, the Anglosphere concept encapsulates the combination of delusion and imperial nostalgia which some Remainers see as integral to Brexit. And, partly because of these associations, it has only recently been given serious consideration in current political analysis.

In our recent book on this subject – *Shadows of Empire: the Anglosphere in British Politics*¹ - we take a different approach, suggesting that the Anglosphere should be seen as the latest manifestation of a much older vein of thinking that was originally evoked in the late Victorian idea of 'Greater Britain', and which subsequently found embodiment in advocacy of tariff

reform and imperial preference, before being reconceived as the union of the English-speaking peoples in the mid twentieth century. This lineage then passed into political loyalty to the Commonwealth as Britain's primary external affiliation, which figured prominently in the campaign to reverse the UK's decision to join the EEC in the 1975 Referendum, before being reinterpreted and reinvented by Thatcherite Eurosceptics in the post-Maastricht Treaty era. For a growing number of Tory sceptics, it formed a potent way to imagine Britain's future as a global, deregulated liberal economy outside the European Union.

In more recent times, the Anglosphere has become very closely intertwined with another emergent concept – 'Global Britain', a term used by a number of Brexiteer Ministers and MPs to denote the opportunity available to Britain if it makes a clean break from the EU's customs union and regulatory orbit to expand trading relations with other countries around the world.

The Anglosphere concept, therefore, references an embedded and evolving tradition, and its ideological provenance and political impact may tell us some important things about the changing contours of elite political mentalities in the last few decades. It is, for instance, striking that those, like British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who advocated an alliance of 'English-speaking peoples' (by which he meant primarily Britain, her 'old dominions' and the US) in the 1940s, were often also supportive of the emergence of a European-wide bloc, and saw the latter as an important point of reference for the UK too. But, by the 1990s when the Anglosphere idea was reinvented, its advocates uniformly presented this lineage as fundamentally antithetical to the UK's European membership.

Eurosceptics Reinvent the Anglosphere

What explains the return of the idea that Britain's historical destiny lies with the liberal market economies of the Anglo-world? Transformations in the global political economy from the 1980s onwards provide an important part of the explanation. The rise of China, and the technological innovations that fired US growth in the 1990s and 2000s, fundamentally altered the landscape within which the European question figured in British politics. Both of these dynamics made the prospect of the UK leaving the EU's apparently slowing economies and 'sclerotic' model of regulation increasingly plausible and attractive. An Asian pivot in world trade, combined with a

new phase of ICT-led capital accumulation that had its dynamic centre in the USA, allowed British Eurosceptics to depict alignment with the regulated social market economy of the European Union as increasingly anachronistic and inhibiting for the future growth of the UK economy.

In political terms, new opportunities were created by the turn of many Thatcherite figures, including Margaret Thatcher herself, against the project of European integration. From 1987 this influential and disparate circle of influence began to look elsewhere for inspiration. Out of favour in John Major's Tory party, and banished to the political margins under the New Labour hegemony, a small group of Thatcherite Eurosceptics built up links with like-minded politicians, think-tanks and media figures in the Anglo-world, preparing a prospectus for the future of the UK outside the European Union. This group included David Davis, subsequently Minister for Exiting the European Union, John O'Sullivan, former speechwriter to Margaret Thatcher, and media mogul Conrad Black. Intellectual and political networks were forged between pro-market and libertarian think-tanks in Washington and London, while at different times governments of the Conservative and Republican right in Canada, Australia and the US provided a welcoming milieu for peripatetic British Eurosceptics. Think-tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and Adam Smith Institute, which had long-established transatlantic ties with Washington counterparts, such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, began to publish occasional pamphlets and speeches making the case for Brexit. These reimagined the UK as a freewheeling, globally networked economy, striking trade deals with the USA, Canada and other non-European countries, providing a first airing for ideas that became prominent again during the Referendum Campaign. Two conferences hosted by the Hudson Institute in Washington DC in 1999 and 2000 were particularly important in this story, bringing together key intellectuals and politicians of Anglo-American conservatism, including Thatcher herself.

For the most part the Anglosphere was largely an elite project, with limited purchase on electoral politics. This changed during the mid-2000s, when rising public hostility to European immigration into the UK, and a sharp decline in trust in mainstream politics supplied a new opportunity for anti-EU radicalism to achieve greater popular appeal. The protracted crises in

the Eurozone that followed the global financial meltdown of 2008 created fertile territory for a popular Euroscepticism to take root. In this context, the idea of the Anglosphere supplied a horizon of possibility and affective ideological content for many Brexiteers, sustaining a way of thinking about Britain's history and its place in the world outside the European Union that gave emotive force to otherwise abstract arguments. From 2010 onwards, this became a much more familiar trope in the Conservative parliamentary party, as a number of Ministers – Boris Johnson included – made trips to Australia and celebrated the merits of the Anglosphere. But this motif remained largely in the background during the Brexit referendum itself, placed by the official 'Vote Leave' campaign behind arguments about sovereignty, public spending and immigration.

'Brexit & Global Britain'

Since the referendum in June 2016, 'taking back control' of our trade policy has become a touchstone of Brexiteer political identity, and a central demand of the influential European Research Group of Conservative Eurosceptic MPs. The countries of the Anglosphere figure prominently in their discourse. The US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada have all been depicted as partners with whom free trade agreements can be rapidly concluded if the UK leaves the European Union's customs union. This is because, alongside former colonial cities in Asia like Singapore and Hong Kong, the Anglosphere countries are considered fundamentally aligned at the level of their political economies, and the expectation generated that deep and wide-ranging free trade arrangements which remove tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade can be established relatively painlessly.

The notion of 'mutual recognition' is the ideological lynchpin of these arguments. To maximise trade, prominent Brexiteers argue that countries should enter into mutual recognition of the standards of each other's goods, services and professional qualifications, as New Zealand and Australia have done (the Australia - New Zealand Closer Economic Relations Trade Agreement). This would abrogate the need for uniform multinational standards or common rulebooks like those of the EU single market. Mutual recognition is thus the key to the exercise of national sovereignty, since the authority to determine the content of regulations is retained

by nation-states and there is no need for supra-national bodies, like the ECJ, to enforce a wider set of rules.

A number of Anglosphere enthusiasts, including journalists such as Andrew Lillico and politicians like Daniel Hannan MEP, have, in the context of Brexit, used these positions to recycle the beliefs of their liberal forebears in sound money, free trade and balanced budgets in their arguments for the UK to leave the EU's customs union. At the heart of this outlook is the ambition to deregulate labour and product market standards, dismantle tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade, and open up public services, such as the NHS, to foreign suppliers. Mutual recognition – and failing that, extensive free trade arrangements - provide the basis for achieving some of the preferred goals of today's pro-market radicals.

Geography vs History

The Anglosphere has enabled its advocates to make a politically powerful and historically resonant argument for freer trade and the imperative of restoring sovereignty to the nation-state. But whilst it has gone into wide circulation since 2016, the influence of such thinking should not be overstated. In important ways it is out of step with some of the leading shifts in political opinion in the last few years, as many voters have become more sympathetic to a more interventionist, protectionist and redistributive understanding of the state's role. And, in policy terms, in order to find a way to pass her Withdrawal Agreement Theresa May has – at the time of writing – pivoted towards the idea of a customs union between the UK and the EU in her negotiations with the Labour party, to get her deal through the Commons.

Outside the UK the election of Donald Trump and the major shift in trade policy that he has engendered, have rendered the idea of a free trading zone involving the leading Anglophone economies highly unlikely. And, in more immediate terms, the prospect of a trade deal with the US has become an increasing point of contention within the Brexiteer camp itself, as Ministers like Michael Gove have made clear their concerns about the prospect of the UK lowering standards in areas such as food production.

The current political context aside, an important reason for the inability to institutionalise the dream of an Anglosphere alliance stems from the structural limitation associated with its core

ambition. The notion that the constraints of geography can be transcended through the advent of new technologies and shifts in world trade is undercut by the evidence supplied by economists whose gravity models indicate the deep and enduring importance of spatial proximity to trading relationships. The question of how to bring any such alliance into institutional fruition has always haunted the Anglosphere dream, and this endemic limitation has been accentuated over time by the growing independence from the UK of countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand, whose economies are now integrated into regional blocs dominated by the USA and China, rather than the old Anglo-world or 'Greater Britain' sterling area economy.

Frustration also besets those who believe Anglosphere might be developed as a deeper set of military and intelligence relationships than currently exist among the 'Five Eyes' nations. President Trump's unpredictable approach to international relations has significantly destabilised this existing alliance. His 'America First' trade and security policies have more generally threatened the foundations of the US-led global security and defence alliance of which these nations have considered themselves key parts since 1945. Support for the Anglosphere is therefore in short supply outside a small number of conservative groupings and former politicians in the Five Eyes countries. And the current political and economic leaders of the Anglosphere largely view Brexit and the political turmoil with which it has been associated with a mixture of bewilderment and pity. In one notable broadside, Kevin Rudd, the former Australian Labour Prime Minister, branded the idea that the Commonwealth represents an alternative to the European Union as a 'delusion' and 'the nuttiest of the many nutty arguments that have emerged from the Land of Hope and Glory set now masquerading as the authentic standard-bearers of British patriotism.' ⁱⁱ

This rejoinder serves as a reminder that this discourse is freighted with controversial connotations in the countries to which it is directed. Its strong associations with the 'kith-and-kin' sentiments of the post-war 'British world', render it anachronistic for many of the citizens of multicultural Anglophone societies, and deeply problematic for politicians of indigenous, Irish or even Francophone descent in USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Despite the efforts of its British advocates to detach the Anglosphere from the racial hierarchies of the late

Victorian era, and to identify its essence in the shared liberal democratic values and institutions of these countries, the political context in which it this idea is received, is itself inescapably marked by the history of Britain's relationships with its former colonies and dominions.

In broad terms, the Anglosphere comprises one of the answers given to the abiding worry in British politics about where UK should find its allies and orientation in the world that emerged out of the Second World War. One of the tragic aspects of the British situation is that none of the responses to it – be they pro-European, Anglo-American, Anglospheric, or some combination of them – has yet been able to equip the UK with an enduring political and popular consensus about its geo-political future. It is the failure to settle upon -- and legitimate -- an answer to this existential question that has periodically thrown the UK into convulsions over its relationship with Europe, and which will in all likelihood continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

ⁱ Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, *Shadows of Empire: the Anglosphere in British Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

ⁱⁱ Kevin Rudd, *Think the Commonwealth Can Save Brexit Britain? That's Utter Delusion*, The Guardian, 11th March 2019, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/11/commonwealth-save-brexit-britain-utter-delusion-kevin-rudd>